

SCAREAPHANALIA

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Artwork: Webster Colcord.

RETRIBUTION

does what a lot of recent horror film directors say they've been trying to do: it tells a story that is as much about the people involved as the horrific events that occur. The screenplay by Guy Nagar (who also directed and produced the film) and Lee Wasserman centers on George Miller (Dennis Lipscomb), a depressed artist who, in the opening scene, tries to commit suicide by jumping from the top of the hotel where he lives. At first, it appears that he's succeeded, but then he mysteriously returns to life and is taken to a hospital, where he has recurring nightmares about a man he's never seen being tortured to death. Dr. Curtis (Leslie Wing), the psychiatrist assigned to him, tries to get to the bottom of George's frightened demeanor during his waking hours, but he won't tell her about the dreams. Ultimately, George goes back home to the hotel - and that's where the real horror starts.

Retribution derives a good deal of its effectiveness from the very good lead performance of Lipscomb. Throughout the film, he is most convincing as a man who, after being given a second chance at life, finds it becoming haunted by terrifying forces. Even after he returns home, George is plagued by bad dreams, and one night dreams that he picks up a woman and goes to her apartment with her, only to use psychic powers to kill her. The next day, George reads about the woman's newspaper, and finally confides in both Dr. Curtis and his platonic girlfriend, a hooker named Angel (Susanne Snyder). But despite their reassurance that the death is a coincidence, George remains scared, and when another murderous nightmare comes true and George finds himself drawn to visit people and places he's never known, he begins to realize that he is being afflicted by an otherworldly force. The suspense builds satisfyingly as he slowly pieces together the mystery his life's become, leading to an intense, frightening climax.

Along the way, there are a few more murders, all of them directed for maximum impact by Nagar, who doesn't skimp on the gore. (The movie had to be cut to avoid an X rating.) What differentiates *Retribution* from most other gore-fests is that the violence isn't the focus of the story; the film is really about George and his struggle to unravel the reasons for the bloodshed. There are long stretches in the script in which nothing horrible happens, but Nagar keeps us interested through well-handled characterizations and good performances by his cast. In addition to Lipscomb, there is strong support from Wing and Snyder, both of whom are a lot more impressive here than in their previous exploitation exercises (*Dungeonnmaster* and *PrettyKill* respectively). Nagar also brings a strong, eerie atmosphere to the movie through Gary Thielges'



George Miller (Dennis Lipscomb) faces the evil in *Retribution*.

real-life death in the platonically involved girlfriend, a hooker named Angel (Susanne Snyder). But despite their reassurance that the death is a coincidence, George remains scared, and when another murderous nightmare comes true and George finds himself drawn to visit people and places he's never known, he begins to realize that he is being afflicted by an otherworldly force. The suspense builds satisfyingly as he slowly pieces together the mystery his life's become, leading to an intense, frightening climax.

dark-toned photography and a moody score by John Carpenter collaborator Alan Howarth. Only a few rather silly-looking opticals of ugly faces superimposed over a couple of scenes detract from the film's effectiveness, and those only briefly. 1988 hasn't even begun yet, but Retribution already stands a good chance of being the best low-budget horror film to be released that year.

A TALK WITH GUY MAGAR!

After spending several years working in television, with 25 hours of shows like The A-Team and Riptide to his credit, Guy Magar has made an impressive feature debut with Retribution. Made for only \$1.2 million, it surpasses many films made on ten times that budget and indicates that Magar is a director to watch.

Michael Gingold: After spending so much time in TV directing, how did you get your first feature off the ground?

Guy Magar: After doing 25 shows, I realized I didn't want to be in the television business, the reason being that you don't have a lot of creative freedom. When you get an assignment, you get a script, seven days to prepare it and seven days to shoot it, and then it's goodbye. The idea of a television director is to go from show to show to show, and that was not what I wanted to do, because I started in film school, and I wanted to make features. So I wrote Retribution with Lee Wasserman, who I met at film school in London, and we started looking for financing. There is no producer in movies that I know of who has ever asked a television director, who'd done episodic shows, to come do a feature. So I knew that in order to have the independence that I wanted, and final cut, I would have to find my own financing. It took four years of talking to people who said they wanted to invest in movies, and finally, by a stroke of luck, a friend of mine had a friend who was a very wealthy man and was interested in getting involved. I lucked out, basically; I had one investor, which is very unusual. I think the guys who did Blood Simple had 68 investors. I had a great cast and a great crew, and we sold the picture at the American Film Market. We sold to about 85% of the world; we were one of the highest sellers. We had a lot of domestic offers from video companies, because they felt it would be a very big cassette seller, and what we did eventually was to go with United Film Distribution.

MG: At 108 minutes, with many long stretches of non-violent material, Retribution seems like the kind of film some releasers would want to cut down for distribution. Did you get any offers of this kind?

GM: I got a lot of offers like that. There were some distributors who wanted to take it and cut it down to an 85-minute chills-and-thrills picture. What I did not want to do, coming into making the picture, was end up making a B-slasher movie, the reason being that I don't go see them, and my friends don't go see them. The idea was not to do a Friday the 13th or Nightmare on Elm Street or Prom Night, as much money as they make, I wasn't interested in that audience and only that audience. I was interested in a much larger audience, people who enjoy movies like The Exorcist or The Omen or Poltergeist. The idea was to do a movie with great characters and a great story, and not to just kill somebody every ten minutes for no reason.

MG: Was the use of extreme violence in the film a reaction against your time spent working in the sanitized television medium?

GM: Well, first of all, it was written in the script that way; when we got down, we wanted to get down. But the answer is yes, there's a lot of things that are a little bit overdone in the picture, and it's a natural



Director Guy Magar filming Retribution.

thing that happens for a lot of first-time filmmakers, especially ones who have been restricted by television, to want to throw in the kitchen sink. But it's also part of my personality to do that. I think that every scene, as a director, should be "maxxed out", whether it's a love scene, or comedy, or a horror scene. I think it's the responsibility of a filmmaker to deliver 100% of what that scene's about.

MG: Retribution was cut from an X to an R, though United Film Distribution has several times released violent films without ratings. Was this kind of release ever considered?

GM: Not by me, because part of my contract with the investor was that I deliver an R-rated film. So even though UPD would have gone ahead, as they did with Rosario's pictures, and distributed an unrated movie, first of all they wouldn't have paid me as much as they did, because you can't play a number of theaters with an X, no matter what you have, and you can't take out ads in some papers with an X. So it has a lot to do with the marketing of the movie; you can't make as much money with an X-rated, violent movie as you can with an R. I think that you limit a picture a lot, commercially, when you have an X, because of the way it's set up.

MG: Dennis Lipscomb was terrific in the lead role; how did you come to cast him?

GM: Dennis never read for the picture. I met Dennis on a TV show about four years ago, and he was the most accomplished and exciting actor I had ever met. So I wanted to work with him, and Lee and I wrote the script for Dennis, and there was never anybody else who was even considered for the role. I wouldn't have made the picture without Dennis, because I knew his personality, and so the picture was designed for him right from the beginning. He was the very first one to read the script after we wrote it, and he ran home and read it, and he came back and said, "I'm in."

MG: Did he contribute anything to the script or his character?

GM: Well, I was a little concerned about when he's bad George, his evil self. It was his idea to keep his limp going, it was his idea to keep the glasses and the cane. What he wanted to do was do it more with his voice and his body posture, and he felt if we cheated completely - and he was right - and lost the cane and the limp from the suicide attempt, that it was too much of a change. He was very concerned about keeping some kind of continuity between when he's good George and when he's bad George.

MG: Do you plan to make more horror films in the future?

GM: I would like to stay away from horror right now, because one of the problems with the business is that they label you. For example, in television I was labeled an action-adventure director. That meant I couldn't do comedy, I couldn't do afterschool specials, I couldn't do love stories. After my first show, Buck Rogers, some people told me I was a sci-fi director and I couldn't do anything else. So I don't want to be known as someone who just does horror movies, even though I could make a lot of money just doing them. I'm really in it because I want to make a lot of different kinds of movies; I would like to be able to do Chariots of Fire someday, I'd like to do Cuckoo's Nest, I'd like to do The Godfather. If I do another horror film right away, they won't let me do anything else, but if I do something else first, then I can come back and do another horror picture, because I won't be labeled a horror director.

Now you're going to ask me about the dog in the hotel, right?

MG: I hadn't planned to, but if there's a good story behind it...

GM: There is... I was just going to put a dog on the counter in the hotel, and I was going to use my sister-in-law's little poodle, who died three days before I needed it. So I didn't have a dog, and when I was shooting at the hotel, there was a gentleman standing there holding the dog, dressed like you saw it, with the makeup and rouge, and sunglasses and hat, the whole deal. So I went up to him and I said, "Is this a performing dog or a circus dog?" and he said, "No, it's not," and he was very offended. So I said, "Why does this

dog look like this?" and he said, "This is my wife." So I said, "Would you mind putting your wife on the counter for two days at 35 dollars a day?" and he said, "No, you can have my wife." And that's how I got the dog; it looks exactly like that in real life, I didn't do anything to it. Cost me 70 dollars. The dog's name is Miss Holly, it's at the end of the credits.



Arnold Schwarzenegger and
Richard Dawson in
The Running Man.

In what film can you see: 1) Arnold Schwarzenegger in a gold and orange body suit; 2) Richard Dawson as a sadistic game show host; 3) Jesse "The Body" Ventura as a TV exercise show host; 4) Erland Van Lith singing opera before killing people; 5) Dweezil Zappa acting; and 6) Mick Fleetwood as a 70-year-old man? The answer to this trivia question of the future is *The Running Man*, a tense, imaginative and often very funny futuristic thriller. It is the first film to be adapted from one of the books Stephen King wrote as Richard Bachman, though he only receives credit under the Bachman name, and these days probably wouldn't be the movie's main attraction anyway. The film's real draw is Schwarzenegger, who by now has adopted a comfortable cinematic persona, and the script by Steven E. deSouza (who also wrote *Commando*) is tailor-made for him. Among other things, it is at least the third film in which Schwarzenegger says the line, "I'll be back" in a threatening manner.

The actor plays Ben Richards, a policeman in the 21st century who is framed by his fellow cops when he refuses to fire on a rioting but unarmed crowd. The other police do shoot the civilians and pin the blame on Richards, who is sent to a work camp. 18 months later, he and several other prisoners contrive an escape that causes them to be hunted by the police, and also attracts the attention of Damon Killian, the host and producer of the nation's highest-rated TV show, "The Running Man". As played by Dawson, Killian is a hilarious one-man parody of the television industry, all smiles on his show but ruthless behind the scenes. He is being pressured by the Justice Department (which runs the TV stations through an Entertainment Division) to boost the ratings on his show, in which convicts are sent through four quadrants of a section of L.A. that was devastated by an earthquake. There they are hunted by huge, heavily armored Stalkers, but lately all the contestants are being killed too easily, and audiences are getting bored. Then Killian sees footage of the prison break, declares that "Richards' biceps will be worth two points alone" and arranges for him to be the next contestant.

It's evident what will happen next: Richards, along with two friends from the prison break, enter the "game zone" and have a series of violent encounters with the Stalkers. But the breathless direction of Paul Michael Glaser defies the story's predictability, and deSouza's screenplay is full of knowing jokes about TV and funny one-liners for Schwarzenegger ("He had to split," says Richards after chainsawing a foe in half). And although there's only so much variety that can be wrung from the fights with the Stalkers, the villains themselves are a literally colorful lot, played by a who's who of athletes-turned-actors (including Jim Brown and Prof. Toru Tanaka) and bedecked with outrageous costumes. As the good guys, Yaphet Kotto and Marvin J. McIntyre are solid as Richards' fellow contestants, Maria Conchita Alonso provides strong support as a woman who reluctantly helps Richards only to wind up a contestant herself (and has a great scene in which she gets the last word with Schwarzenegger), and although Zappa and Fleetwood have limited screen time as leaders of some freedom fighters, Zappa has one of the movie's best lines. And Schwarzenegger is Schwarzenegger, never taking the story too seriously and allowing the audience to enjoy the film in the same manner.

Nightflyers is a minor science fiction horror movie that has already closed, after being unwisely marketed as a Halloween horror film. (A Halloween movie set in outer space? Come on...) It is in fact more of a mystery thriller than a shocker, centering as it does around the enigmatic captain of the spaceship in which most of the story takes place, and which also gives the movie its title. The crew of the *Nightflyer*, introduced by team coordinator Miranda (Catherine Mary Stewart) in some unwieldy voice-over narration, is setting out to find a strange, intelligent force called the Volcryn. Arriving on the ship, they discover that the captain, Royd (Michael Praed), will only be appearing to them as a hologram, which makes the crew uneasy but doesn't bother Miranda. She, in fact, begins to have a kind of relationship with him; but before she has to face the problem of consummating an affair with a hologram, a series of accidents begins to occur that injures and kills off the crew one by one. A malevolent force is clearly at work, and both the crew and the filmmakers forget the mission's original purpose as they try to save themselves from the evil.

The direction is credited to T.C. Blake, which is a pseudonym for Robert Collector, who left the project after distributor New Century/Vista asked him to reedit his final cut. So it's hard to know who is responsible for the movie's slow pacing; perhaps Robert Jaffe, who wrote the script from a novella by George R.R. Martin, is to blame. Nevertheless, Jaffe also produced and has gotten a nice look for the film on a budget of around \$4 million. The photography by Shelly Johnson is unusually moody for a high-tech sci-fi film, and the special effects are good, from the opticals by Fantasy II to the mechanical and makeup effects by Robert Short. The quality of the effects does allow for a few good scare sequences, particularly one in which the ship's telepath, Winderman (Michael Des Barres) is half-decapitated (the lower jaw still remains). Unfortunately, Des Barres is by far the most energetic member of the cast, and though he returns to life and continues to communicate telepathically (without his brain?), his loss is the movie's too. The finale is bizarre enough to be of some interest (with the motivation for the murders being a weird cross between *2001* and *Psycho*), but for the most part, *Nightflyers* is slow going.



Catherine Mary Stewart vs. headless man in *Nightflyers*.



Werewolf undergoes tests in *Howling III*.

Having not seen *Howling II*, I can't comment as to how it compares with the current *Howling III*, though Phillippe Mora, who directed both films, doesn't think much of *II*. (By the way, the dozen repeats of Sybil Damming popping her top were the distributor's idea.) Mora, in fact, says that he made *Howling III* in order to do the werewolf story he wanted to make, and has been fairly successful at creating a movie that gently spoofs the horror genre. There are, in fact, very few real scares in the movie, which plays even the transformation scenes for humor. With its Australian setting, fish-out-of-water subplot and good-natured comedy, it might have been called *Werewolf Dunderdag*.

Howling III deals with not one, but two races of werewolves: a traditional kind that hails from Siberia, and a marsupial type that carries its young in pouches and inhabits the Australian outback. (There is also a brief reference to a colony living in California, the only connection this film has to either of the other two *Howlings*.) The two races are represented in the movie by, respectively, a Russian ballerina named Olga (Dasha